Section 1: The Nazi rise to power

1.1 What problems did the Weimar Republic face?

Germany emerged from its defeat in the First World War with a new government, called the Weimar Republic. It faced a lot of serious problems. Your task will be to examine these problems and decide which was the most threatening.

Why did Germany need a new government in 1918?

Since 1888 Germany had been ruled by Kaiser (Emperor) Wilhelm II. Although Germany had a parliament, called the Reichstag, it was the Kaiser, a strong leader, who had most of the power. He chose ministers to help him run the country. He made sure that they would do what he wanted. If they did not, he would sack them.

The Allies (Britain, France and the USA) would only make peace with Germany if it became more democratic. This meant getting rid of the Kaiser and setting up a new government. Throughout Germany there were violent uprisings against the Kaiser. Eventually, he was forced to flee to the Netherlands. Germany became a republic.

By the autumn of 1918 the Kaiser was in big trouble. For four years Germany had been fighting in the First World War. It now faced certain defeat. The German army was retreating and people in Germany faced starvation.

Friedrich Ebert became the new democratically elected leader of Germany. Ebert was leader of the Social Democrats, the largest party in the Reichstag.

How was the Weimar Republic governed?

In 1919 there was a general election. Friedrich Ebert became the President. There was too much violence in Berlin, the capital, for the new government to meet there, so it met in the town of Weimar. The government was therefore called the Weimar Republic.

During 1919 a new constitution was drawn up. This was a set of rules for how Germany would be governed. As you can see from the diagram below, it was very different to the old system, under the Kaiser. In fact, the Weimar constitution was one of the most democratic systems of government in the world.

**THE WEIMAR CONSTITUTION**

**THE PRESIDENT**
- Elected every seven years
- Controlled the armed forces
- Stayed out of the day-to-day running of the country
- In an emergency he could make laws without going through the Reichstag (parliament)

**THE CHANCELLOR**
- Responsible for the day-to-day running of the country
- Chosen from the Reichstag by the President
- Like a prime minister

**THE REICHSTAG (parliament)**
- Voted on new laws
- Members elected every four years, through a system called PR (proportional representation). This system gave small parties a chance to have a say in parliament

**THE GERMAN PEOPLE**
- Elected the President and the members of the Reichstag
- All men and women over the age of 20 could vote
- All adults had equal rights and the right of free speech

Discuss

1. What do you like about the Weimar constitution?
2. What weaknesses can you see in it?
3. What differences can you spot between the way the Weimar Republic was governed and the way the country you live in is governed?

Coming up ... This constitution looks promising, doesn’t it? Unfortunately for the new Weimar Republic it was set up at a very difficult time. As you will see in the rest of this section, the new Republic faced serious problems.
Problems, problems, problems!

You are now going to study, in detail, five problems that the Weimar Republic faced. Do not think that each problem went away as another appeared. In fact, new problems combined with old problems. More and more problems built up. Together these problems threatened to destroy the Weimar Republic.

It was the end of the First World War that set the ball rolling ...

PROBLEM 1: DEFEAT IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR – THE ‘STAB IN THE BACK’

Within days of taking over, the new government had to sign an armistice that ended the fighting in the First World War. The leaders of the Republic had little choice but to sign this – the German army was retreating and people at home faced starvation.

However, not all Germans saw it this way. Just a few months earlier the war had been going well. The German army had been advancing and victory seemed possible. During the war the Kaiser had not announced any bad news to the German people, so the peace, in November 1918, had come as a shock.

People were now very bitter and were looking for someone to blame. A simple explanation for the defeat quickly spread. The great German army had been “stabbed in the back” by the new government.

On the next ten pages you will analyse the problems which combined to weaken the Weimar Republic. On pages 16-17 you will assess the importance of each problem and show the links between them.

Discuss

Why might many Germans have wanted to believe in the idea that their soldiers had been “stabbed in the back” by the leaders of the Weimar Republic?
The First World War ended with the signing of the armistice in November 1918. However, it took until June 1919 for the Allies to agree on a peace treaty. The new German government was not invited to the discussions. These discussions took place at Versailles in France so the treaty was called the Treaty of Versailles.

What did the German people hope for?

The German people hoped for a fair treaty. There were three reasons for this.

1. The Allies said that they wanted a more democratic Germany. This is what we have created. The Kaiser has gone. Our new government needs support, not punishment. The Allies will not punish us for what the Kaiser did.

2. President Wilson of the USA is on our side. He has already said that the treaty should not be too hard on us. Wilson has come up with Fourteen Points that will form the basis of a fair treaty. France and Britain will have to listen to him.

3. Germany did not start the First World War. It is not to blame for the war. All the countries involved should take a share of the blame. We do not expect to be punished for a war we did not start!

What did the German people get?

The terms of the Treaty of Versailles came as a real shock to the German people. France and Britain put pressure on President Wilson and forced him to accept a treaty that was designed to seriously weaken Germany.

PART 1: LAND

- Germany lost 13 per cent of its land (and about 6 million people living there).
- This lost land had important raw materials, such as coal.
- Germany was split in two. This was to give Poland access to the sea.
- German troops were not allowed in the Rhineland. This was to make the French feel safe from a German attack.
- All Germany’s overseas colonies were taken away.

PART 2: ARMY

- The German army was to be reduced to just 100,000.
- The navy was cut to 15,000 sailors and only six battleships.
- Germany was not allowed submarines, tanks or an air force.

PART 3: BLAME

- In the ‘war guilt’ clause, Germany was blamed for the war.
- This enabled the Allies to demand compensation from Germany for all the damage that had been caused.

PART 4: MONEY

- Germany had to pay reparations. Most of the money would go to France and Belgium.
- At Versailles no sum was fixed. But in 1921 the Allies fixed the total amount that Germany had to pay at 2.600 million.
How did the German people react?

The German people felt humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles. They hated the Treaty, and the people who made it.

The German government did not like this Treaty either. However, they had little choice but to accept it. The Allies threatened to restart the war if they did not sign the peace treaty.

However, opponents of the Weimar Republic now blamed the new government for signing the Treaty. To them, the fact that the government had signed the Treaty showed how weak they were and reinforced the view that they had stabbed Germany in the back.

Source 2

This cartoon appeared in a German newspaper in July 1919. It was called 'Clemenceau the Vampyre'. Clemenceau was the leader of France who wanted a treaty that would cripple Germany. The woman on the bed represents Germany.

Source 3

This cartoon appeared in a German magazine, in 1919, attacking the Treaty. The mother is saying to her child: "When we have paid one hundred billion marks then I can give you something to eat."

Activity 1

Imagine that you are an editor of a German newspaper in 1919 that is against the government. Design a front page reporting on the Treaty of Versailles. It should include:

- a powerful headline that will sum up the mood of the German people
- a summary of the key points of the Treaty
- a description of how German people feel about the Treaty. Aim to get across the feelings of shock, anger and humiliation
- an explanation of why people feel this way. You could include some quotes from your readers
- a cartoon. You could use one of the cartoons here, or you could research or draw a cartoon of your own
- a comment on why the leaders of the Weimar Republic are to blame for the Treaty.

Activity 2

On pages 12-13 you will find details of four extremist groups that used violence to try to overthrow the Weimar Republic. They all harmed the Republic a bit because they reduced the confidence the German people had in their new government. But you must decide which group represented the biggest threat.

Your task is to produce a secret report for the Weimar government on each of the groups. Your report should:

1. Briefly describe each group and explain how it tried to take over.
2. Examine the strengths and weaknesses of each group. Consider:
   - leadership
   - support
   - organisation
   - how close it came to taking over the country.
3. End by giving each group a danger rating out of 5 (5 = a serious threat; 1 = a small threat). Make sure you explain your rating.

PROBLEM 3: POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The Weimar Republic was democratic – people had the right to choose their government. However, some groups did not think that this was the best way to run Germany. These extremist parties wanted to tear the Weimar Republic apart.

EXTREME, LEFT-WING PARTIES

Communist Party
- They believed that they should run the country on behalf of the workers.

EXTREME, RIGHT-WING PARTIES

Nazi Party
- They believed that Germany should have one strong leader, whom everyone should obey.
Left-wing violence

Which extremist political group was the biggest threat to the Weimar Republic?

THREAT 1: THE SPARTACIST RISING, 1919

Who?

Why?
They did not trust the new government. The Spartacists thought that Ebert would not improve the lives of working people. They wanted a full-scale Communist revolution like the Russian Revolution of 1917.

What?
In January 1919 workers were protesting throughout Germany. The Spartacists tried to turn this into a revolution. In Berlin they took over the government’s newspaper and telegraph headquarters. They hoped protesters would join them and take over other buildings, but this did not happen. The government ordered the army to stop the uprising. The army was helped by units of the Freikorps. These units were made up of ex-soldiers who were anti-Communist. In the fighting that followed over 100 workers were killed.

Success?
The uprising was badly planned. The Spartacists did not get support from other left-wing groups. Rosa Luxemburg was captured by the Freikorps and shot. Her body was dumped in a Berlin canal. Karl Liebknecht was also murdered. Without their main leaders the Spartacists struggled.

THREAT 2: THE RED RISING IN THE RUHR, 1920

Who?
Groups of workers led by members of the Communist Party.

Why?
Many German workers were angry about bad pay and bad working conditions. Workers had been protesting throughout 1919.

What?
In 1920 a Communist ‘Red Army’ of 50,000 workers occupied the Ruhr region of Germany and took control of its raw materials. This was one of Germany’s main industrial areas. The German army, with the help of the Freikorps, crushed the rising. Over 1000 workers were killed.

THREAT 3: THE KAPP PUTSCH, 1920

Who?
Freikorps units, led by Wolfgang Kapp.

Why?
In 1920 the government ordered that the Freikorps brigades be disbanded. It had little need for them now that left-wing groups had been crushed.

What?
Around 12,000 Freikorps marched to Berlin. The government was forced to flee. The Freikorps put forward Kapp as the new leader of Germany.

Success?
Kapp and the Freikorps failed to win much support. In Berlin workers went on strike in protest at the putsch. This made it impossible for Kapp to rule. After four days he fled from Berlin and Ebert’s government returned.

THREAT 4: THE MUNICH PUTSCH, 1923

Who?
The Nazi Party (led by Adolf Hitler) and General Ludendorff (a popular First World War hero who had been involved in the Kapp Putsch). The Nazis had 55,000 members and their own private army called the SA.

Why?
Adolf Hitler and the Nazi Party believed that democracy only led to weak government. Instead they thought that there should be one political party, with one leader.

What?
The Nazis planned to take over the government and set up General Ludendorff as leader of Germany. They started in Munich. Hitler and 600 of his SA burst into a meeting where the leader of Bavaria (Kahr) was speaking. They forced Kahr to promise to support their plan.

Success?
The putsch had not been properly planned. Kahr was allowed to leave the meeting, and the following day he withdrew his support. The German government responded quickly. They ordered the army to crush the revolt. When armed Nazis marched to a military base in Munich they were met by armed police and soldiers. In the fighting that followed fourteen Nazis were killed. The leaders of the putsch were arrested and Hitler was sent to prison for five years. He was released after just nine months, but during this time the Nazis nearly fell apart without their leader.
PROBLEM 4: INVASION OF THE RUHR
Germany struggled to keep up with the reparation payments to the Allies. In 1922 Germany announced that it could not afford to pay reparations for the next three years. France did not believe this and was determined to make Germany pay. In 1923, 60,000 French and Belgian troops marched into the Ruhr, an important industrial area of Germany. They seized control of all mines, factories and railways. They took supplies from shops and set up machine-gun posts in the streets.

PROBLEM 5: HYPER-INFLATION
The government becomes very short of money.

The government prints more money to pay workers and to pay its debts.

The more money printed, the less it is worth.

People lose confidence in the German mark.

Prices rise at an incredible rate (hyper-inflation).
In January 1919 one US dollar was worth nearly 9 marks.
By November 1923 one dollar is worth 268 billion marks.
At one stage an egg costs 80 million marks and a glass of beer 130 million marks.

By November 1923 the German mark is worthless.

How did hyper-inflation affect the German people?
Hyper-inflation affected people in different ways, as you can see from the table below. However, there were far more losers than winners. For most people in Germany in 1923, life became very difficult.

HYPER-INFLATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Winners</th>
<th>Losers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People in debt found it easier to pay off their loans.</td>
<td>People with savings were the biggest losers. The value of what they had saved fell drastically. Pensioners were badly hit. In 1919, 6000 marks was a small fortune. By 1923 it would not even buy a stamp for a letter!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businessmen found it easier to pay back money they had borrowed to build up their businesses.</td>
<td>Workers found that wage increases did not keep up with rising prices.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source 4

There were major food shortages because farmers did not want to sell food for worthless money. There were deaths from starvation. Some people turned to crime because life was so hard. Source 6 shows how everyday life was affected.

Source 6

An account written by someone who lived through hyper-inflation in Germany:
On Friday afternoons in 1923, very long lines of workers waited outside the pay windows of the big German factories ... until at last they reached the pay window and received a bag full of paper banknotes.
The figures on the banknotes could be as high as 18 trillion marks.
As soon as they got their money the workers began running to food stores. Here there were slow queues. If you got there first a half kilo of sugar could be bought for 2 million marks. If you were at the back of the queue, by the time you got to the counter, 2 million marks would only buy you a quarter of a kilo of sugar.

People carried their money around in sacks or prams. Life was madness, nightmare, desperation and chaos.
Did hyper-inflation damage the Weimar Republic more than any other problem?

The Weimar Republic was seriously weakened by hyper-inflation. Millions lost their savings and there was widespread poverty. As we have seen, ordinary, respectable Germans, who had worked hard all their lives, lost out, whilst debtors and big business did well. This turned many people against the government.

It was hard to have confidence in the government when everything was in such chaos. Some of the government's other problems had been outside their control but hyper-inflation was caused by the government's own actions. This made many moderate people turn against the Weimar Republic.

In future years few people in Germany would forget the damage caused by hyper-inflation. Some historians have claimed that it damaged the Weimar Republic more than any other event in the first five years of its existence. What do you think?

Activity

Look at the five problems the Weimar Republic faced between 1918 and 1923:

- DEFEAT IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR – THE 'STAB IN THE BACK'
- THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES
- POLITICAL VIOLENCE
- INVASION OF THE RUHR
- HYPER-INFLATION

Rank these in order, starting with the problem that you think damaged the Weimar Republic the most, and ending with the one that you think damaged it the least. Explain each decision you make.

Smarter Revision: Linking factors

How were the problems faced by the Weimar Republic linked together?

Activity

Look at the picture below. Five students are working together to find links between the different problems faced by the Weimar Republic. One link has been explained for you.

1. On your own version of this diagram, in bubble 2 explain how the Treaty of Versailles is linked to Political Violence. In bubble 3 explain how the Treaty is linked to the Invasion of the Ruhr.

2. Can you find any other links between other problems? Make sure that you can explain the links.

3. Which problem do you think was at the root of the difficulties facing the Weimar Republic? Look for the problem that is linked to the most other problems.

Concept maps

Being able to understand the problems faced by the Weimar Republic and how they were linked together is an important part of this Enquiry in Depth. As you will see on page 18, exam questions often focus on this part of the course. Building a concept map with other students is a good way of revising this key topic. Concept maps help you to:

- develop good explanations
- identify the key factors that explain an event or development (in this case why the Weimar Republic faced problems)
- show how the factors worked together
- show which factors were the most important.